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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [KCRM](#) [SNAR](#) [SOCI](#) [TD](#)
SUBJECT: CRIME PROBLEM ROILS NEW YEAR

REF: 07 PORT OF SPAIN 1205

CLASSIFIED BY: DCM LEN KUSNITZ; REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: With a record number of 388 homicides in 2007 and 14 new homicides by January 8, 2008, crime remains a front burner issue. The media misquoted National Security Minister Martin Joseph in early January as stating the GOTT had failed in all its efforts to combat crime, setting off a new round of commentary on the crime situation. Joseph and the Prime Minister subsequently sought to correct the record amid partisan sniping. Top security officials met at a retreat the weekend of January 5-6 to discuss anti-crime strategies, and an embattled Joseph gave an emotional recap of the GOTT's efforts in parliamentary remarks January 7. One reputable analyst argues that the crime problem is both "structural and sociological" and the Minister's efforts have to be judged in context. Others blame the government for failure after failure. With Carnival approaching, the public remains wary and the government continues considering its options. End Summary

Most Homicides Ever

¶2. (U) Trinidad and Tobago finished 2007 with a spate of homicides that brought the total to at least 388, although some media say the total is actually 392 or 395. Any of these figures is an increase over 371 homicides in 2006 and 386 (the previous record) in 2005. Although approximately half of these are gang-related, the sheer number of violent deaths, regardless of motive, continues to alarm and appall the public. Many speak of the psychological toll of the violence, making persons concerned over their safety and that of their children, and self-curtailling activities out of fear.

Media: Government has failed

¶3. (U) During a January 3 press conference at the Ministry of National Security, Joseph noted that some measures the GOTT had put in place to fight crime in 2007 had not succeeded, and added the government planned to conduct an extensive review of its crime fighting efforts and procedures. All three major daily newspapers January 4 carried large headlines asserting that Joseph said the government had failed utterly to combat crime. In response, the Ministry of National Security issued a press release on January 5 emphatically denying the GOTT had failed to combat crime or that Joseph had said the GOTT had failed. On the same day, under press questioning, Prime Minister Patrick Manning denied his administration was contemplating declaring a limited state of emergency due to the crime situation.

GOTT Weekend Retreat

¶4. (C) Joseph and a number of high ranking police and military officers met from the afternoon of Friday, January 4 through Sunday, January 6 at Salybia Beach Resort to discuss the situation, but reportedly did not arrive at any new measures or initiatives. The retreat drew some sniping from the media, which portrayed officials as lounging around

while crime raged unchecked. Prior to that session, and at the request of a government official, the Embassy passed some suggested legislative and procedural changes for the security forces to consider that could help in the anti-crime battle.

Statistics Show Decrease in Some Crimes

15. (SBU) Although homicides were at an all time high in 2007, government figures state there were year-over-year decreases in some types of serious crimes:

	2006	2007
Homicides	371	388
Woundings and Shootings	657	645
Sexual Offenses	903	759
Serious Indecency	81	66
Burglaries	4973	4851
Abductions	214	162
Kidnappings for Ransom	16	13
Thefts of Motor Vehicles	1496	1740

Skepticism over these claims, however, is widespread, with some arguing many crimes go unreported. This is either because victims assume reporting the crime would be futile, or because some victims fear the police are actually in league with criminals and not to be trusted. One analyst also argued that kidnappings were down because many potential victims had either emigrated from TT or were paying protection money to gangs. However, the skeptics have produced no hard evidence on the extent of under-reporting, emigration, or protection money paid in any year.

Speaker Denies Opposition Request for Crime Debate

16. (SBU) Opposition Whip Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj of the United National Congress (UNC) read a statement in Parliament January 7 decrying the "state of lawlessness and anarchy" prevailing in Trinidad and Tobago, and requested the crime situation be debated as a matter of "urgent national importance." House Speaker Barendra Sinanan, however, denied this request on grounds that the situation was not sufficiently important, specific and urgent to justify suspending normal House business in order to conduct the debate. Though the opposition continues to claim the Speaker's ruling was arbitrary and biased, others note it was in conformity with the Parliamentary rules.

Security Minister Defends Record

17. (SBU) In an emotional January 7 parliamentary presentation that followed Maharaj's attempted gambit, Joseph adamantly denied the GOTT had failed to address crime, or that he had ever said the government had failed, stating crime numbers were down in all categories except homicide and auto theft. He observed that TT's proximity to Venezuela meant both drugs and guns were pouring into the country and that combating this was a complex problem. The Minister then recapped a number of measures the GOTT has instituted to fight crime, including "transforming" the Police Service, increasing joint police/army patrols, heightening gang surveillance and bolstering intelligence gathering. He further promised to build 18 new police stations over the next three years, which led to opposition hectoring since the construction of the initial five "model" police stations is far behind schedule.

18. (SBU) When the floor was opened to debate, UNC MP Roodal Moonilal read aloud a mock resignation letter to PM Manning from Joseph and then invited the Minister to sign the note. Moonilal also attempted to refute Joseph's earlier remarks, stating that TT needed short-term basic solutions to crime rather than grand plans. The government bench pointed out that the mere summation of what the GOTT was already doing belied opposition claims of inaction. Prime Minister Manning later told the press he did not find the opposition's behavior to be serious and characterized Moonilal's intervention as the monologue of a stand-up comic. Subsequent to the January 7 Parliamentary session, the GOTT also has been publicizing the measures underway mentioned in Joseph's speech and also noting what was new in his presentation.

Business Groups Concerned

19. (C) Business leaders also increased their rhetoric on crime over

the last week, with a conclave of private sector groups issuing a statement calling for greater government action on crime. One industry source told us that the communique was calibrated in a way so as to not rile the government, but to seek to encourage anti-crime actions. Another local business group met with the Prime Minister January 8 and, among other issues, raised its serious concerns over the deteriorating security situation. Manning reportedly told the group that getting the security forces to combat crime was both a "leadership and management" problem and that he was considering replacing the entire top layer of the police force with foreign officials and "catapulting" some excellent junior officers into higher positions. The Prime Minister also told the group that his government was looking at legislative changes that might facilitate such a plan. (Note: The GOTT is looking for a new Commissioner of Police - the current Commissioner was due to retire last November and has been temporarily extended in place - and has made no secret that it intends to consider non-Trini candidates.)

Analysts Weigh In

¶10. (SBU) While the partisan sniping from the opposition seeks to piggyback on real public concerns, at least one respected analyst has taken the position that Minister Joseph is being unjustly targeted. In a January 8 press interview, analyst John La Guerre opined that the problem was not Minister Joseph - who has been "far more honest" in his assessments than past National Security Ministers - but rather "structural and sociological" problems in society. To La Guerre the crime spiral "has a lot to do with the sudden increase in wealth in the country, thereby making the drug trade more lucrative than it has been in the past. What we are witnessing is the incapacity to cope with the problem in the short-term." Some other commentators, however, are less willing to give the Minister the benefit of the doubt and continue lambasting him and the government for failure to get a handle on the crime situation. An intermediate position among a few gave the government some credit for its actions, but found it still wanting and also lamented problems in the court system as a contributing factor to societal lawlessness.

Comment: Playing for Time

¶11. (C) As noted in reftel, crime remains a major preoccupation and is harped on constantly by the media. With 14 homicides in the first eight days of January, TT is averaging close to two violent deaths a day. With its recently reconfirmed majority, though, the PNM-led government so far seems content to play for time while it considers options and waits for the measures already underway (and a few new ones underway and under consideration) to have an effect. Manning said as much in early January when he told the press his government's goal is to "completely eradicate" the drug trade that he sees as responsible for the criminal surge. The current year, though, will be a "period of transition," and "the measures we are putting in place will have the desired effect in due course." In this regard, the GOTT may be banking on the public's being distracted soon by the current pre-Carnival "party" season and giving it and its beleaguered National Security Minister a temporary respite.

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